Found
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Psalm 139:1–12
Jonah 3:1–3
Luke 15:1–2, 11–31

"While he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion;
he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him." Luke 15:20 (NRSV)

What I found was what I had already half seen in many places without ever clearly knowing what it was I was seeing or even that I was seeing anything of great importance. Something in me recoils at using such language, but here at the end I am left with no other way of saying it than what I finally found was Christ. Or was found. It hardly seems to matter which.

Frederick Buechner
The Sacred Journey

Startle us, O God, this day and every day, with your truth. And open our minds to your word that has come to us in Jesus Christ our Lord, your Word made flesh. Amen.

The subject of this entire enterprise is God—always has been, is, and always shall be.

"What shall I preach about?" the newly ordained minister asked his professor. The wise scholar said, "Preach about God, and preach about twenty minutes." I've told that vignette many times, but that is the last time, I promise (even though I have not always—not much, in fact, my children remind me—abided by the time objective).

The subject is God, the One with whom we have ultimately to do. John Calvin said that all true wisdom is both anthropology—the human question: who are we?—and theology, who God is. The philosophic question, from the ancients until now, is, is there meaning, is there purpose to our being here, is there anything ultimate? The greatest literature the human race has ever produced deals with it.

Macbeth took the dim view. There is not anything ultimately meaningful.

> All our yesterdays have lighted fools
> The way to dusty death, Out, out, brief candle!
> Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
> And then is heard no more. It is a tale
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
> Signifying nothing.
> (*Macbeth,* Act 5, Scene 5)

The neo-atheists, Christopher Hitchens' *God Is Not Great,* Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*, and Sam Harris's *The End of Faith*, have continued the old conversation and sold a lot of books arguing that there is no God and, Walter Brueggemann said here Thursday night, rehashing a litany of old nineteenth-century arguments in a not very articulate way.

Even more recently, Eric Weiner, war correspondent for National Public Radio, has written another best-seller, *Man Seeks God: My Flirtations with the Divine*. Weiner explains that if he wasn't an outright atheist, his religion was pretty shallow. He was, he says, born into a family of gastronomical Jews. "If we were allowed to eat it, then it was Jewish and had something to do with God. As far as I was concerned, God resided not in Heaven or the Great Void, but in the Frigidaire, somewhere between the cream cheese and salad dressing."

Weiner's personal religious apathy ended when he had what appeared to be a life-threatening health crisis. He went on a worldwide search for God. The book is not at all heavy theologically, but it's lots of fun and contains some wise observations about the current God conversation in our country. "The discourse," he says, "has been co-opted by the True Believers on the one hand, and the Angry Atheists on the other hand." God, in the current conversation, is not much fun, Weiner observes: religious leaders mostly shout, and the God we see is constantly judging and smiting. Weiner remembers something G.K. Charleston said: "It is the test of a good religion whether you can joke about it" (see Eric Weiner, "Americans Undecided about God," *New York Times,* 11 December 2011). Which brings me to a vignette that I have been saving for an opening like that. I have, you may have observed, beautiful grandchildren, thirteen of them, in fact, all of whom I have acquired since coming to Fourth Church twenty-six years ago. Three local grandchildren attend St. Mathias Parochial School and are having a wonderful time. And part of their school experience is attending mass at St. Mathias Church across the street. The teachers line the children up for mass and tell them, I am sure, that they are about to enter the house of God so they must be very quiet, no talking, and above all else, no

laughing. These three little girls also come to Fourth Presbyterian Church frequently and go to Sunday School. Their mother, Mary, decided that before I retire, Kate, Ella, and Lilly should see what their grandfather does on Sunday morning, so a few weeks ago, instead of taking them to Sunday School, she and the girls' father, my son, brought them to worship. They sat quietly, no talking, no laughing. When I began the sermon and said a few things that caused the congregation to laugh—out loud, robustly, in fact—four-year-old Lilly said to her mother, "Is that what he does—he tells jokes?" When it happened again, a few moments later, Lilly, recalling her own instruction about how to behave in church and becoming concerned, asked her mother, "Is he going to be in trouble? Is he going to get fired?" I'm not sure she did, but Mary should have said, "No, but he is retiring in a few weeks."

The question is God, the subject is God, and I want to consider three ideas and three biblical texts that, in my own experience, transformed the way I have come to think about God.

Probably the oldest human idea of God has something to do with transcendence. God is God and not human—God exists somewhere other than here where we exist. God is not limited as we are. God is almighty, omnipotent, omniscient, perfect in every way. And if you want to relate to God, you have to be very careful. You have to do things for this God, follow rules, make offerings, sacrifice animals in order to earn favor in the form of health, good crops, many children, victory in battle.

When the Greek philosophers weighed in, they proposed that if there is a God, God must be perfect, in the sense of needing nothing, feeling nothing, perfect in being, apart from the messiness of human life. The philosophers spoke of the "apatheia" of God—God's apathy.

The Judeo-Christian contribution to the age-old conversation begins with the Hebrew idea that while God is certainly transcendent, almighty Creator of all that is, King of the universe, there is another side to God. God cares, God cares passionately about human beings, God loves human beings, and the most remarkable and best idea of all, God does not remain isolated, remote, waiting in heavenly splendor for us to approach. Instead there is the most remarkable idea of all: God comes to us. God approaches us. God intrudes in our lives. God tracks us down. Jonah ends up in the belly of a big fish, but it is really the story of a God who calls Jonah; gives him a job to do; and when Jonah tries to get away, books passage on a ship headed toward the very farthest outpost of the known world, God doesn't get angry or pout. God comes after Jonah. God will not let Jonah go.

The 139th Psalm is a beautiful poem expressing exquisite theology

> O Lord, you have searched me
> and known me. . . .
> Where can I go from your spirit?
> Or where can I flee from your presence?
> If I ascend to heaven, you are there.
> If I make my bed in [hell], you are there.

This is an inescapable God, a God who loves so much, wants to be in relationship so much, wants us to be at home in God, that there is nowhere we can go that God will not be there, no human situation—no sickness, no depression, no suffering, not even the end of life itself—where God is not lovingly, compassionately present, calling us home.

"If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea," the psalmist wrote, "even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast."

That psalm and the theology it represents was absolutely new for me, and when I first encountered it, it helped me think differently about my own life and faith journey: a God who follows us, tracks us down, a God who is a blessed intruder in our lives, a God who will never let us go. That's the first big idea.

The second is grace. Like everyone, I suppose, I had a hard time with the notion of grace, argued with it quietly for years. It is so patently unfair. After all, you get what you want and need in this world by working for it, not because it is given to you. That is deep in me, put there by Depression-era parents who worked very hard and told me every day of my life that you only get what you work for. I can remember sitting in a continuing education seminar, early in my ministry, and the leader was discussing the theology of Karl Barth and how it was based on the free gift of God's grace in Jesus Christ and that we cannot do anything to earn it, that it falls on us like a soft spring rain. And I recall objecting, If that's the case, why are we here at all? Why the church? Why try to be good if God loves us anyhow? Gently, gently, the leader suggested that I go back to my room and simply take another careful look at a story Jesus told one time when religious leaders were taking him to task and asking those very questions.

It's in the fifteenth chapter of Luke: "Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, this fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." Translate that "If they get in, why bother trying to be good and upright and righteous? If the sinners get a free pass why are we expending all this energy fasting and praying and tithing and refraining from sin and restraining ourselves? If they are getting in why are we wasting our time trying to be good?"

So Jesus tells a little story. It's about a father who has two sons. It is, I think, the best story in the world. He is a man of affluence and station. His boys work on the estate. One day, out of the blue, the younger son asks for his share of the property that will come to him when his father dies. He wants his inheritance now. He's tired of waiting for the old man to die. What he does is appalling. It simply was not done, ever, in that culture. It is unthinkable. What his father does is equally unthinkable. He gives his son his inheritance, a substantial sum of money representing the boy's share of the estate. The young man takes the money and runs, far away, and has a great time: wine, women, and song; lives it up until the money is gone, all of it. He has nothing left, no job, no clothes, no money. So he goes looking for a job, and all he can find is slopping hogs, which no good Jew would be caught dead doing. And all he has to eat is the leftovers the hogs don't want.

And then he thinks, "I know where there is food. I'll go home. I know I'm persona non grata around there, so I'll just ask for a job. I'll say to my father, 'I have sinned against heaven and before you and I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'"

He rehearses his speech all the way home, imagines the moment when he knocks on the door and is ushered into his father's study, feeling sheepish and foolish and looking absolutely dreadful.

In the meantime, his father, instead of nursing his wounded male pride, instead of waiting for the opportunity to say, "I told you so, you ingrate! I knew this would happen"—the father instead had been keeping vigil, waiting, looking out the window, standing in the driveway, watching the road every day. And then one day he sees a lone figure in the distance. I can recognize my sons and daughters from across two football fields—and have. So the old man does another unthinkable thing: gathers his robe around him and runs, runs down the road, Palestinian men don't run for anyone or anything, but he runs down the road. The boy sees him coming, and when they meet finally, before the boy can begin his well-rehearsed apology, his father's strong arms are around him and he's kissing him and I imagine there are tears on both of their cheeks. Finally the boy starts to say what he planned to say, but he never gets it all said, because his father is already giving orders: "a robe, the best one, a ring, new sandals, get the fattest calf and kill it, for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!"

What a story! How absolutely stunning. Fred Craddock, one of the master preachers of our time, translates the story into the vernacular of a small, rural Georgia town. "He what? He threw a party for the rascal? I can understand letting him back in, but after what he did he ought to come

through the back door and eat in the kitchen for a while. He ought to be put on probation, a trial period, maybe work off some of the money he took from the old man. That boy ought to learn a lesson or two. But a party? Where's the lesson in that?"

Craddock concludes, "The only thing, and I'm honest with you here, the only thing I can imagine that was being taught here is this: 'We love you, we forgive you, we're glad you're home.' That's all I can think of. Is that enough for a party?" ("Party Time," *The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock*, p. 173).

The older brother sounds uncomfortably familiar. I'm an older brother, and I know my younger brother got away with a lot more and had it a lot easier than I did. It is the timeless, universal lament of the oldest child. "I've been working like a slave for you for all these years, yet you never gave me even a goat so I might party with my friends. But this son of yours who devoured your property with prostitutes gets a fatted calf." Maybe it's not only older brothers who say things like that. Grace is like that. It's hard. We stumble all over it. And then one day it becomes clear. That's what God is like—like that father running down the road to welcome his lost son home, every lost son or daughter home. And then he does it again: leaves the party and goes out into the field to reclaim another lost son, because the party will not be complete until both sons are there. Grace. Amazing grace. God loves us. There is nothing we can do to persuade God to stop loving us. There is no disappointment so great that God will stop loving us. There is no far country we can go to that God's love does not follow us.

When you get it, finally, you understand that aspiring to be a good and faithful person, aspiring to be good and kind and generous and honest, is not in order to persuade God to love, but precisely because God is love and already loves you and claims you and promised to be with you every day of your life and beyond. And all you can do is try to reflect that love in your life and promise and thank God your whole life long.

There's a celebration. The music and laughter wafts across the fields. And that is the third idea about God that changed the way I think and try to live. There is about this faith of ours a deep and profound joy, laughter, and lightness of being—not timid or shallow, but profound joyfulness because in one way or another we have been found by God, followed and pursued by God, and in some way we have come home to God's house, where we are loved, welcome, safe, secure forever.

The late Henri Nouwen, Dutch priest and theologian, had long wanted to visit the Hermitage in St. Petersburg to see Rembrandt's great painting, *The Return of the Prodigal*. When he was finally able to spend time in St. Petersburg, he arranged to have several hours on several days alone with

the painting. The result was a beautiful book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. Rembrandt, perhaps out of his own tortured life, understood the meaning of the parable perhaps better than most scholars. It is the moment of encounter, of revelation, if you will. The son kneels. His clothes are disheveled; one shoe is off; his head bowed in abject humility. The father, in a rich red robe, a big bearded man, leans over his son, almost enveloping him, his hands gently resting on the son's back. Nouwen studied the hands. One is clearly a man's: stubby, even fingers, slightly rough. The other hand is different—longer, slender, tapered fingers: a feminine hand. God is like that: loving, forgiving, welcoming, protecting mother-father. Ever since I read Nouwen's book, I have wanted to see that painting. And two years ago, thanks to the generosity of our children, we traveled to St. Petersburg and stood, not for hours as Nouwen did, but long enough to know that we were seeing one of the most profound expressions of our faith and the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The father ran down the road to welcome his son home. In that beautiful psalm (139), God goes to the ends of the earth and to the depths of hell to find us and to hold us fast.

At a critical point in my journey, when I was not at all sure about what to do next and when I was asking the kinds of questions people in their early twenties ask and when I was more confident than I have ever been since that I would finally understand all there was to understand, and that if God was real at all I would find God in my mind, my reading and studying, my mother sent me a poem, one of her favorites she said she thought I might be old enough to appreciate. It is Francis Thompson's "The Hound of Heaven":

> I fled him, down the nights and down the days;
> I fled him, down the arches of the years;
> I fled him, down the labyrinthine ways
> Of my own mind; and in the midst of tears
> I hid from him, and under running laughter . . .
> From those strong feet that followed, followed after.

At the end of that poem, the fleeing is over.

> Rise, clasp my hand
> And come!
> Ah fondest, blindest, weakest
> I am He whom thou seekest!

And so, it is God seeking us, as we seek God. And it is in God, the God who comes to us in Jesus Christ, that you and I are at home, safely, securely, forever.

Amen.